



## Increased Vulnerabilities: Considering the Effects of Xeno-Racist Ordering for Romanian Migrant Sex Workers in the United Kingdom

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### Abstract

This article draws on data from interviews with sex workers in Welsh massage parlours and individuals involved in the provision of support to migrant sex workers in Wales and England. Drawing on concepts of xeno-racism and 'everyday ordering', it illustrates the ways in which policies and state institutions enable violence against sex workers in a way that is increasingly mediated and compounded by race and immigration status. It argues that an awareness of regular and hostile policing practices, coupled with fears of deportation, among a sample of primarily Romanian migrant sex workers is exposing them to increased risks of harm and exploitation.

### Keywords

Sex work; Romanian; Roma; immigration

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## Introduction

In the United Kingdom, a series of laws and social attitudes undermine the safety and freedoms of sex workers (Sanders 2016). Though all sex workers must operate within a context in which the risks of violence, stigma and repressive policing have been well documented (Kinnell 2006; Phoenix 2009), this paper examines the ways in which ongoing changes to immigration policies associated with the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union are likely to, and are in some instances already, jeopardising migrant sex worker safety.

While in the United Kingdom it is possible to be prosecuted for a variety of prostitution-related offences, the act of selling sexual services is not itself illegal. Despite this, sex work is not officially recognised as work by the state. As increasingly restrictive immigration policies limit the ability of migrants to secure employment across a range of 'legitimate' and regulated sectors of the labour market both in the European Union and United Kingdom, migrants have turned to unregulated forms of labour, including sex work, in search of income (Burnett and Whyte 2010; Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants [PICUM] 2019). Legal cases have established precedents that protect migrant sex workers in the United Kingdom from repressive policing and deportation. The European Court of Justice ruled that a sex worker can be self-employed as an 'independent provider of services' (*R Tilianu v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions* 2010: para. 9). Additional rulings identified that sex work performed on a self-employed basis constitutes self-employment for the purposes of European Union law (*Case 115–116/81 Adoui and Cournaille v Belgium* 1982). Yet, despite such rulings, sex workers have been unable to escape the regulatory gaze of the state, which continues to ensure their increased susceptibility to harm and violence (Benoit et al. 2018; Sanders and Laing 2017).

This article argues the bolstering of measures to exclude 'low-skilled' European Union migrants from entering and working in the United Kingdom will push migrant sex workers further into the shadows of an already risky and precarious sector of the economy. This is influenced by literature from a range of labour market settings that show the ways in which efforts made by undocumented migrants to avoid detection, detention and deportation make them increasingly vulnerable to exploitative labour conditions and practices, while disincentivising them from disclosing the harms and injustices they experience (El-Enany 2020; Sanders 2016). The article builds on literature that draws attention to ways in which a range of state policies expose migrant sex workers to more harmful working environments and practices as they seek to avoid repressive immigration enforcement across a range of European countries and regions (Jahnsen and Skilbrei 2017; Vuolajärvi 2019). It provides data from semi-structured interviews with sex workers and members of sex worker support organisations that reveal some of the ways in which an awareness of regular and hostile policing practices, coupled with fears of deportation, among migrant sex workers from the European Union are exposing them to increased risks of harm and exploitation.

It is hoped the insight provided begin to address the lack of existing analysis in relation to the possible implications of increasingly restrictive immigration policies for migrant sex workers in the United Kingdom. It reflects on the challenges and risks of engaging with sex work in premises that are argued to be increasingly susceptible to raids on grounds of undocumented migration. Therefore, the article seeks to demonstrate the ways in which immigration status compounds those structures and processes that have been shown to enable the harm and oppression of all individuals who engage in sex work in its variety of forms (Di Ronco 2020; International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe 2020: 11; PICUM 2019; Vuolajärvi 2019).

The methods underpinning this article are examined in more detail later. However, it is important to note here that the majority of data collection took place in Cardiff, the capital city of Wales. Data collection was facilitated by members of the Wales Sex Work Support and Safety Group and Cardiff Sex Work Forum, which identified that the majority of sex workers across the city's parlours were Romanian Roma. Additional data provided by POW-Nottingham—an organisation that supports migrant sex workers across the industry in Nottingham, England—identified that 59 of the 61 individuals they supported during the last year were Romanian or Romanian Roma. The article acknowledges that estimating the composition of

the industry is notoriously challenging, and as a result accurate data on the numbers of migrant workers across the sex industry is lacking (Hester et al. 2019). It does not assume a high prevalence of Romanian and Romanian Roma workers across the United Kingdom sex industry. Similarly, it does not suggest the findings can be applied to all Romanian and Romanian Roma sex workers operating across various sectors of the industry. However, it is hoped that the data provided is useful for generating insight into some of the emergent threats and means through which Romanian and Romanian Roma sex workers are affected by the precarity imposed on them by increasingly restrictive immigration policies.

The article first documents changes in the nature of immigration control in the United Kingdom. It then reflects on the regulation of sex work and immigration and its exclusionary effects for migrant workers (Di Ronco 2020; Hubbard 2004; Vuolajärvi 2019). Having outlined the methodological procedures, data is presented to illustrate the factors and processes that underpinned participation in sex work among Romanian and Romanian Roma sex workers in the research sample. It considers how migrant workers in Cardiff have used massage parlours to navigate the oppressive policing, social and policy structures to which they are exposed. Finally, it considers how changing immigration controls and xeno-racist narratives are exposing Romanian sex workers to harm and exploitation. This foregrounds reflection of the ways in which race and immigration status increasingly mediate and compound the harming and exploitation of sex workers.

### **Managed Migration, Roma Suffering and the Ongoing Indifference and Expedience of the British State**

Immigration policy across the world is used to limit the entitlements of certain groups and communities to state support, and to curtail the protection of their rights and freedoms (Fassin 2020). In the United Kingdom, increasingly restrictive immigration policy has been championed by consecutive governments and Home Secretaries looking to cultivate a 'deterrent regime' and 'hostile' (now 'compliant') environment. This environment has been designed specifically to render life impossible for migrants without permission to live in the United Kingdom (Webber 2019: 77). It removes their eligibility to rights to housing, health and freedom from inhuman or degrading treatment (among many others). It is through a range of policies associated with this managed migration approach that we see the extensive and embedded nature of xeno-racism, through which migrants are tolerated on the condition they demonstrate a contribution to the economy in a way that is recognised as useful (Fekete 2001). However, those areas of the labour market into which migration is permitted are limited, and individuals who cannot find work in these sectors become reliant on more informal and unregulated economies to generate income, one of which is sex work (International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe 2020; Mai 2009; PICUM 2019).

Therefore, it is important to recognise the participation of many Romanian and Romanian Roma citizens in sex work as a culmination of multiple economic, social and political factors. Limited opportunities to participate in more regulated sectors of the labour market in Romania and the United Kingdom, in conjunction with persistent social and economic pressures, are seen to contribute to decisions to participate in sex work (PICUM 2019; TAMPEP 2015). Indeed, Romanian citizens have faced specific restrictions on their ability to travel to, work and live in the United Kingdom. The labour market has been the only way Romanian citizens have been able to gain national status since Romania's 2007 accession to the European Union (Guy 2003; Webber 2012). This EU2 expansion saw the British Government place restrictions on the ability of Romanians to access labour markets. Due to fears of an influx of migrants, EU2 nationals were treated as not habitually resident and could, therefore, access state benefits only once 12 months of paid employment were completed (UK Network of Sex Work Projects 2008: 6). Such restrictions, in conjunction with many others, have been identified as typifying the ongoing expedient approach adopted by consecutive British Governments to avoid negative financial costs associated with labour migration, while maximising its economic benefits to the state (Poole and Adamson 2008: 33). Under this system, the majority of Romanian migrant sex workers have no recourse to public funds unless they have explicitly sought to formally document their economic activity as a self-employed worker. As the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, Romanian nationals are required to provide evidence of their

past economic activity and residency to register for 'settled' or 'pre-settled' status to avoid breaching immigration controls. However, this, as the data later reveals, is something that sex workers face numerous barriers and challenges in doing.

In addition to conditions imposed on Romanian citizens, it is important to acknowledge that Romanian Roma communities have been denied legitimate status even when fleeing persecution (Crowe 1996). There is insufficient space to explore the extensive and persistent suffering that characterises much of the history of the Roma within this article (for a detailed account see Crowe 1996). Key examples can be seen in the fascist violence witnessed in Rostock, Germany, in the 1990s (Crowe 1996; Wemyss and Cassidy 2017; Yuval-Davis et al. 2017). Even when faced with documented fascist violence and discrimination at the hands of Romanian authorities, the Home Office steadfastly rejected claims for asylum among the majority of Romanian Roma citizens. This is despite strong grounds for eligibility under both the 1951 Geneva Convention and Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (European Roma Rights Centre 1999). Such rejections protected arrangements through which legitimate status of Romanian and Romanian Roma individuals in the United Kingdom could predominantly be gained only through the labour market (Wemyss and Cassidy 2017; Yuval-Davis et al. 2017).

The dehumanisation of Roma communities throughout history has been used as an effective strategy for justifying discriminatory behaviour towards them (Crowe 1996: 235). This continues to permeate social and political debates, shaping the lived experiences of Roma communities across Europe today (Yuval-Davis et al. 2017). The extensive surveillance and disruption of Roma sex work through immigration and prostitution policy is, therefore, not an entirely novel phenomenon. Rather, it is a more recent iteration of the ongoing and sustained persecution of Roma and Romanian citizens more broadly. Indeed, the English Collective of Prostitutes (2019) have documented the ways Brexit is 'screwing' Romanian sex workers. They cite numerous instances of the extensive and disruptive police enforcement practices Romanian migrant sex workers are exposed to in the United Kingdom. They describe the intimidatory tactics adopted by police officers who have raided and arrested sex workers, and distributed deportation notices despite legal rulings outlined earlier protecting migrant sex workers from removal (see Case 115–116/81 *Adoui and Cournaille v Belgium* 1982).

### Sex Work Regulation in the United Kingdom

Selling sexual services is not itself a criminal offence in the United Kingdom despite a number of laws designed to control and regulate sex markets and workers. Offences include keeping, managing, acting or assisting in the management of a premises classifiable as a brothel (i.e., any establishment that is used for trading sexual services by more than a single individual). This discourages collective working, a key factor that compromises sex worker safety (Sanders and Campbell 2014; Weitzer 2013). The *Sexual Offences Act 2003* contains legislation in relation to control for gain, whereby causing, inciting or controlling prostitution for gain are noted offences. The Act affords the courts powers to close premises used for sex work through brothel closure orders. Legislation such as the *Proceeds of Crime Act 2002* has also been used to seize the assets of individuals involved in the recruitment of, and gain from, the prostitution of others. In addition to entrenched social stigmas—such as those embedded in the *Contagious Diseases Acts* of 1864, 1866 and 1869, which framed 'prostitutes' as vectors of disease, or New Labour's policies that presented sex work as an antisocial moral aberration (Home Office 2004, 2006)—concerns around immigration and human trafficking have taken a central role in international efforts to suppress sex work in recent years. In the United Kingdom this has facilitated the control and disruption of sex workers as part of a broader political rhetoric of addressing humanitarian concerns and threats to national sovereignty. These xeno-racist narratives have enabled the emergence of a further stigmatising lens through which sex workers can be monitored, detained, charged and deported. The increased use of purportedly humanitarian anti-trafficking justifications for the administration of repressive immigration raids, including those on massage parlours, have been documented across a number of jurisdictions including Belgium and Italy (Di Ronco 2020), Sweden, Norway and Finland (Vuolajärvi 2019), and England and Wales (Feis-Bryce 2017). It has been identified that such frameworks can create double standards in governance through which



foreign sex workers are deported while domestic workers are offered welfare and therapeutic support (Vuolajärvi 2019).

In the United Kingdom, sex workers across a range of off-street premises have been subjected to extensive police surveillance and raiding in recent years. In 2006 Operations Pentameter One and Two saw the systematic raiding of premises known to be used by sex workers across all police force areas in England and Wales. While the operations were presented as part of an ongoing and sustained effort to address the trafficking of women in the sex industry, the raiding of 822 premises—including those where the data informing this article was collected—led to the identification of only 11 individuals wanting police assistance in relation to trafficking and exploitation (Feis-Bryce 2017: 24). By contrast, the majority of resulting prosecutions were for breaches of immigration controls and drugs possession (Davies 2009). This has been echoed in subsequent raids such as those of Operation Companion in 2013 and Operation Lanhydrock in London in 2016, which failed to identify or ‘rescue’ any victims. Of the 24 arrests made, 17 related to immigration breaches, of which four were detained, four deported voluntarily and nine deported forcibly (Mayor of London 2016). These operations exemplify how, when raiding sex-working premises, authorities have used human trafficking as a Trojan Horse from which they can emerge to prosecute sex workers for a range of non-trafficking offences. They encapsulate the harm caused by the ongoing subjection of sex workers to politically expedient moralising policy agendas and forced welfarism, in which oppressive state governance strategies demonise sex workers while being masqueraded as part of ongoing efforts to combat humanitarian concerns (Scoular and O’Neill 2007). Through these processes of ‘punitivist humanitarianism’ (Vuolajärvi 2019), it is a sex worker’s apparent status as a migrant or ‘other’ and their working in premises associated with undocumented migrant labour that render them readily policeable.

### **Disrupting Socio-Spatial Dynamics of Massage Parlours**

Hubbard (2004) describes a process of ‘purification’ that has led to new spaces of exclusion (Hubbard, Matthews and Scoular 2008) across Western cities. He documents how sex-working spaces are being reclaimed, as they create barriers to the promotion of family-oriented gentrification. However, within these increasingly contested urban spaces, Cooper (2016) has described how many massage parlours are able to maintain a degree of tactic acceptance, affording them a degree of public visibility. Parlours often visibly exist in the public consciousness as places where sex work takes place, and can be contrasted with private flats or brothels, where greater measures are taken to avoid detection by neighbours and the authorities (Hubbard 1999; Hubbard and Lister 2015).

The raids outlined earlier demonstrate how sex workers have become vulnerable to surveillance and intervention under the guise of human trafficking, on grounds that migrant women are perceived as being at risk of such victimisation. It is through this purported concern that women have been identified as in need of protection and subsequently charged with immigration offences and deported (English Collective of Prostitutes 2019; Vuolajärvi 2019). Here we begin to see the increased vulnerability of migrant workers in these informal and broadly unregulated spaces, as their immigration status becomes increasingly insecure. The targeting of massage parlours through raids on human trafficking is indicative of a broader perception that significant numbers of migrant women work from them (e.g., see Weaver 2020). This perception makes them particularly vulnerable to state officials and abolitionist organisations eager to respond to purported immigration and trafficking offences.

### **Methodology**

Massage parlours are spaces in which sexual services are produced and consumed. They exist alongside a variety of other off-street premises, such as private flats, saunas and erotic dancing venues, as part of a ‘(sub)urban sexscape’ (Hubbard and Lister 2015). The massage parlours in this study fit what Hester et al. (2019: 26) describe as ‘managed brothels’, which are owned by a third party and from which multiple individuals sell sexual services.

This article is informed by data that has been collected over the past five years. This period has been shaped by ongoing consultation with members of the Wales Sex Work Safety and Support Group and Cardiff Sex Work Forum, which contain representatives from local and national sex worker support organisations. Meetings and discussions with group members identified the provision of services including outreach for street workers in South Wales. That said, the provision of formally funded support for off-street workers does not exist in Wales. Informal outreach in Cardiff's massage parlours was, therefore, provided by the chair of the group as part of a broader local authority safeguarding role. This informal and unfunded outreach work involved supporting sex workers in ways such as accessing healthcare provision and financial advice. This had been conducted since 2009 in recognition of unmet support needs among parlour workers. The chair of the group acted as a gatekeeper for this research, and facilitated a period of data collection between 2015 and 2017 as part of a PhD project exploring how sex workers interpret and contextualised their labour. During this phase of data collection, a series of 25 semi-structured interviews were held with 16 sex workers and three massage parlour managers. These were recorded and anonymously transcribed. The research employed opportunity sampling, and most women who took part had established a relationship with my gatekeeper through her outreach work. The three massage parlour managers, who collectively oversaw the running of four parlours in the city, were Welsh, one of whom was the only male participant in the study. Each participant, due to the unique ability of my gatekeeper to establish rapport and reciprocity with parlour workers, was forthcoming in their involvement with the research. The instrumental role of my gatekeeper facilitating data collection, in addition to a number of methodological procedures and ethical issues associated with this stage of the study, have been explored in a separate article with a particular focus on positionality and power in the field (see Hanks 2019).

The sample of 16 sex workers was comprised of 10 women from Romania (each of whom identified as Roma), in addition to two from Wales, and one from each of the following countries: England, Albania, Poland and Australia. Discussions with participants identified that the majority of women working in the massage parlours across Cardiff at the time of data collection were Romanian, and that most identified as Roma or 'Gypsy'. In addition to interviews with parlour workers, two formal interviews were held, alongside numerous discussions, between 2017 and 2018 with my gatekeeper to reflect on her understanding of massage parlours and my thematic coding and analysis of the data. The university ethics committee did not permit offering cash remuneration, so 20-pound vouchers that could be spent across a range of retailers were given in return for participant contributions. All participants gave informed consent to participate, and have been given a unique pseudonym. Personal information that could make parlour workers identifiable through the research has been omitted.

The period of data collection coincided with the build up to, and aftermath of, the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom. At the time it was not immediately clear how Brexit would affect the lives of Romanian migrant sex workers; although, rates of hate crime and xenophobia targeting European migrants in the United Kingdom increased considerably (Burnett 2017). It became clear that developments in immigration policy since 2017 have the potential to radically alter the working practices and routines that were observed and discussed during fieldwork. This article attempts to capture some of the implications of the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union for the migrant workers in the research sample now that the effects of Brexit for European migrant workers, such as threat of deportation (Halliday 2020), have become more tangible.

Having remained in contact with my gatekeeper and the Wales Sex Work Safety and Support Group, two subsequent interviews were conducted in autumn of 2020, one with my initial gatekeeper and another with a migrant support worker at sex worker support organisation POW-Nottingham.<sup>1</sup> These focused specifically on the implications of the changing immigration status of Romanian sex workers in the United Kingdom. POW-Nottingham has a dedicated project called 'MWAH' for migrant sex workers and identified supporting 61 migrant sex workers over the past year, including 48 Romanians, one Hungarian, one Czech Roma and 11 Romanian Roma individuals. This support is extended to migrant workers across the sex industry. Within the context of the data collected, it is Romanian and Romanian Roma women who are

being disproportionately pushed towards increasingly dangerous and precarious workplace conditions, as their ability to access legitimised labour is restricted, and their precarious status can be capitalised on by those seeking to exploit, arrest and deport them.

## Findings

### *Motivating Factors for Engaging in Sex Work*

Persistent structural inequalities underpinned and shaped decisions to migrate and participate in sex work. Despite the diverse experiences of participants, a recurrent finding across the narratives provided was that women engaged in sex work in massage parlours to generate income. Basia, a Romanian sex worker, noted:

I think everybody coming for this job, it's just for making money. It doesn't matter if they use it for their family or for themselves. ... Women choose [sex work] because in my country you don't have places where you can find a normal job, or if you find it, you are not so very good paid. ... You're [paid] like 200 pounds a month. ... It is not enough.

Basia contrasted income available to her in Romania with the estimated 2,000 pounds she could earn in the massage parlours in Cardiff over a two-month period, depending on the amount of clients she had. She noted this income enabled her to save money, while paying for her families' utility and medical bills.

Basia's account highlights the importance of contextualising participation in sex work within limited labour opportunities in Romania. In addition to the challenges of accessing employment, several participants noted that their personal and familial circumstances meant they needed to earn money quickly. Belina, a Romanian sex worker, noted that although she can secure non-sex-working employment in Romania, massage parlours enable her to make more money relatively quickly when necessary:

When I start this job, I have problem. My ex-husband, he [left] me and I [have] one [child], one daughter, and I'm alone. I can't do in Romania, earn lots of money because I need to pay [for the] house, to buy food, ... clothes.

I have one job in Romania, same here supermarket, you know? ... But I'm thinking one day what can I do for this life? I need to do something, not for me, just for my daughter, you know?

Last year I need money for my father, for operation, and that's why I come back [to the parlour].

Belina's account encapsulates the narratives that were echoed by respondents across the dataset. Sex work provided a means of generating income, and played a specific role alongside possible alternative forms of labour market participation available to them. Some noted that securing any form of employment in Romania was challenging, while those able to secure work were restricted to menial and low-paid sectors. This is not to say that work in the massage parlours was highly lucrative. They worked long shifts, often making themselves available on a 24-hour basis with no guarantee of clients. However, as the next section outlines, the massage parlours played a variety of functions that sex workers found beneficial.

### *Promoting Safety: The Roles and Functions of Massage Parlours*

It is important to foreground the notions of increased safety in massage parlours by first acknowledging their existence in broader contexts of coercive and harmful state surveillance, as outlined earlier. Participants were acutely aware that police monitored them closely. For example, routine visits were made by a plain-clothes officer from the local police force, which one parlour manager described as:

fact finding about what's happening in the parlours. ... They're saying they want to work with us, but going back eight years ago they were saying that then, but they got all the intelligence and raided the parlours.

Sex workers and parlour managers were highly dubious about collaboration with police. However, participants were aware that their compliance with police monitoring was required to avoid being shut down. This resulted in a fractious and varied relationship between the police and the parlour workers. While there was reluctance to engage with authorities, there was awareness that they could be contacted if absolutely necessary:

Zofia [Romanian sex worker]: We can call the police, which happens. It happens sometimes.

Belina [Romanian sex worker]: Here you know it is very secure, because I know if something happens, I can call the police, you know? In the street nobody help me, and I [am] scared.

Of considerable importance is that rather than presenting parlours as safe spaces, sex workers viewed massage parlours as spaces that offered a greater degree of safety than alternative sites of sex work. In addition to having CCTV and being able to work alongside colleagues, the ability to call the police if necessary was linked to the visibility and tacit acceptance of massage parlours as premises used by sex workers:

Zofia [Polish sex worker]: In flats you don't normally have cameras. ... It's very, very risky in flats, because they could come in, boys of a group, they know you don't have any security, or camera, anything. Nobody can prove [it's] them. ... [Flats] shouldn't exist in the first place, ... it's more dangerous. In the parlour, it's more safe for me, much safer.

Basia [Romanian sex worker]: People coming all together, if you have any problems, people, they watch your back, ... they make you feel safer, but as well they prepare you mentally to be safe, in case you need help.

Mair [Parlour manager]: We always look at the cameras, and no matter where you are in the building, come in the kitchen, look at the camera, don't answer the door if [the client's] got a hoodie on, ask them to take their hat off so we can see them on the CCTV.

These extracts show how collective workspaces with multiple sex workers, secured entrances and surveillance measures promoted a sense of safety. Ironically, the degree of visibility that makes parlours vulnerable to police raids was also seen to enhance a sense of safety. Despite a general reluctance to engage with the authorities, sex workers could call the police for support without compromising their work premises. This is evident in Zofia's response that notes police can be contacted if absolutely necessary—something that working from premises that 'shouldn't exist' disincentivises.

In addition to enhancing perceptions of safety, massage parlours provided all the facilities required for women to be able to live and work, maximising their earning capacity while minimising their financial outgoings. Rather than having to secure and pay for accommodation separately, a fee was taken by the parlour each time a client was seen. Of the 50 pounds that a client would be charged for a 'basic service', half would go to the parlour. All of the money earned in addition to this through the provision of 'extras' was kept by the sex worker. Therefore, women would only be charged when they were themselves earning money. It was also noted that the informal nature of parlour work coupled with their existing infrastructure and clientele meant women could arrive and start working immediately while reducing the risks of being prosecuted for soliciting their services independently elsewhere. These are important factors when reflecting later on the ongoing appeal of massage parlours to migrant workers looking to secure income in the absence of alternative opportunities.



### *Anonymity and Everyday Ordering*

In addition to providing safer spaces that enabled women to generate income in the absence of suitable alternative labour market options, massage parlours enabled women to navigate challenges rooted in the entrenched stigmas they faced. While the degree of visibility that the massage parlours had could enhance perceptions of safety, they were also discrete enough to enable women to keep knowledge of their sex work from certain individuals and communities. Basia highlighted the importance of this: 'Back home, my family don't know what I do, and without being funny I think they will kill me if they will find [out].'

This desire among sex workers to avoid disclosing their interaction with stigmatised work was recognised across the sample. It was echoed by a support worker at POW-Nottingham, who described how their service users 'become so vulnerable, especially those from the Roma community, because of the shame in their community'.

There were several implications for sex workers who wanted to avoid the disclosure of their sex work, many of which were compounded by their immigration status. Several participants described how securing accommodation away from massage parlours required them to have a National Insurance number. However, acquiring this required, in part, the provision of a residential address. Due to a desire to avoid being associated with sex work, women were reluctant to use their massage parlour's address in their applications. As Mikaela, a Romanian sex worker, explained:

I think it is very difficult for girls to find a home to live, that's why most of them live in [the parlour]. They stay and sleep here for three or four months, and then they go home. ... Some of them can't even have a National Insurance number because they don't have an address to give it to the job centre.

This illustrates how migrant sex workers often became dependent on parlours, as the legal and social contexts they existed within created barriers to, and in many instances disincentivised them from, formally establishing their employment or immigration status in the United Kingdom. It is in this way that 'living in' was both synonymous with Romanian migrant workers and a key signifier of vulnerability. Indeed, without a National Insurance number or official documentation migrant workers had no recourse to state support if required. My gatekeeper described the vulnerability this imposed on sex workers who could become reliant on the massage parlours as a place of work and accommodation to avoid destitution. She described the situation of one woman she had been working to support:

She didn't have a footprint here because she worked here illegally [and] she didn't meet the criteria [for welfare]. They didn't take in to account the 10 years she'd been here working in parlours. When she went to the Department for Work and Pensions she couldn't pass the habitual residency test. Then she didn't have an address and without that couldn't access benefits. When she became homeless, there was nobody. ... She had nowhere else to go.

As the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, Romanian workers are being required to demonstrate that they satisfy the criteria for pre-settled status to authenticate their immigration status. Sex workers are required to provide official documentation such as a National Insurance number to be granted permission to work and reside. Yet, as demonstrated, the social and legal frameworks that sex workers have been forced to operate within have rendered them invisible. POW Nottingham described how historically they have:

come across a lot of people that did not have any National Insurance number. They were not in any government database, nothing, absolutely not existing in this country. But what is happening now is everybody is desperate to have their National Insurance number, they want to register as self-employed, they want to have their self-assessment done and pay taxes because they are worried.

That migrant workers are seeking to formalise their work is key to help navigate immigration enforcement. However, as demonstrated, migrant sex workers experience a range of obstacles and barriers to attaining necessary documentation to establish their citizenship—not to mention the ongoing disruptions that COVID-19 have on this process. Those factors that have previously disincentivised sex workers from formally documenting their work and residence are now creating barriers when seeking permission to remain after Brexit. The following section outlines the emergent consequences this is having for some Romanian migrant sex workers, as they seek to generate income in a context in which their immigration status is increasingly precarious.

### *Promoting Vulnerability and Conditions of Harm*

Data collection in Cardiff's massage parlours revealed the extensive surveillance of sex workers by the police. Thus, it is important to reflect on the possibility that they may be disincentivised from continuing to work from them in future, despite the perceived benefits for their safety and discretion. In addition to the risks of displacement, interview data with POW-Nottingham revealed how the threat of deportation and increased vulnerability of Romanian migrant sex workers is already leading to changing working practices and experiences among individuals they support. It was described how the threat of deportation is being used to exploit sex workers. For example, during negotiations, sex workers had reported being threatened by clients. As explained, 'if [the sex worker] doesn't agree to lower the price, [the client] starts with, "I'm getting you deported, I'm going to call the police on you"'.

It was further described how some clients are increasingly using the threat of immigration control to exploit and extort sex workers, in turn, compromising Romanian worker safety. POW-Nottingham described how a woman:

was called by a client and the client asked for the price with no protection, and she said, 'no, I'm not doing that'. The client said, 'OK, I'm going to give your phone number to all my friends [and tell them] not to contact you because you're a f\*\*\*ing migrant'. ... When they hear the worker's accent the abuse starts, and then of course some of them accept [and provide the client a service]. ... They are exposed more than before, definitely.

This highlights how the contexts in which Romanian migrant sex workers operate are being used to intimidate and extort them. While the insight from POW-Nottingham does not relate specifically to parlour workers in Cardiff, it reveals the dangers to which all Romanian migrant sex workers may be exposed, prompting consideration of the broader implications of these findings for sex workers across a range of work settings.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The data provided illustrates the increased risks Romanian and Romanian Roma migrant sex workers are exposed to as immigration enforcement is bolstered, as well as the threat of deportation deployed to monitor, extort and exploit them. The reduced visibility many migrant workers have previously sought to navigate harmful effects of stigma, oppressive legislation and policing mean that they now face barriers when looking to establish their citizenship.

This poses challenges for those migrant workers who have previously sought work in massage parlours due to their perceived ability to afford a degree of autonomy and safety unavailable to them elsewhere. The ongoing surveillance of massage parlours by police and immigration officials is likely to disincentivise undocumented migrants from working from those spaces they have previously sought out precisely because of their ability to enhance their safety. It is well documented that individuals continue to work regardless of the state's willingness to recognise them or their work as legitimate or guard against their destitution (Stevens 2004). In the absence of measures to address the entrenched social and economic inequalities that underpin and shape the participation of many Romanian and Romanian Roma individuals in sex work, it is, therefore, highly likely that at least some will continue to work despite their increasingly

precarious immigration status. POW-Nottingham identified that migrant women they support are continuing to engage in sex work, but that they are exposed to increasingly dangerous and exploitative conditions. This would support wider findings that reveal undocumented workers are forced to accept labour in less regulated and more exploitative conditions, where they are disincentivised from reporting the harms they face (Burnett and Whyte 2010). Thus, it is likely that those migrant workers unable to establish their status will be pushed further into the shadows of an already clandestine industry.

The data provided demonstrates how, in an environment in which all citizens are responsibilised as border enforcers (Webber 2012), migrant sex workers are exposed to extortion and exploitation at the hands of some clients. This highlights how the enabling and facilitating of violence against sex workers by the state is being done in a way that is increasingly mediated and compounded by race and immigration status. Those women who do not embody 'Britishness' will be increasingly required to legitimise their presence in the United Kingdom. This will introduce and enable more workplace discrimination against migrant women, further amplifying and legitimising discourses of disposability towards migrant (sex) workers (Kinnell 2006; Lowman 2000). Though it is crucial to continue advocating for the decriminalisation of sex work around the world, it is important to recognise how migrant sex workers are irrespectively confronted with the xeno-racism that permeates social and state structures (Fekete 2001).

The tacit acceptance of massage parlours may be increasingly challenged, as migrant sex work is no longer just a possible signifier of purported moral and humanitarian concerns, but also of sovereignty and national security. Therefore, it seems that a number of caveats accompany the National Police Chiefs' Council guidance in which sex workers are presented as individuals deserving of police protection (Holland 2015). Such protections (if and where they happen to exist), far from being guaranteed, are becoming increasingly racially and culturally stratified as part of a system that presents sex workers as both simultaneously offenders and victims. Though all sex workers face structures and processes that are designed to harm and oppress them, these can be seen to be compounded by immigration status. Thus, it is of paramount importance to acknowledge and challenge the specific ways migrant sex workers are marginalised and oppressed within broader systems that promote and entrench precarity and harm across the industry.

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<sup>1</sup> POW Nottingham is not a member of the Wales Sex Work Safety and Support Group but was contacted independently to ask about their perceptions. However, they requested that they are identifiable through the article.

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